

The effects of gender and relational well-being on hedonic and eudaimonic sexual well-being

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Introduction

Research has found that sexual well-being (SWB) contributes to a good quality of life and mental and physical health (Diamond & Huebner, 2012). SWB also has a large role in the development and maintenance of healthy relationships. According to Lisa M. Diamond and David M. Huebner, the best way to promote well-being within a relationship is by engaging in positive sexual interactions (Diamond & Huebner, 2012).

The majority of past research in the field of SWB has focused solely on hedonic indicators, such as sexual satisfaction and sexual affects, while ignoring the importance of eudaimonic indicators. In fact, the fields of psychology and sexology rarely study what is “optimal” or “beyond good” (Mahrer, 2008). However, a coexistence of both factors is necessary for optimal SWB (Gravel, 2013). Therefore, a concrete conceptualization of SWB must include hedonic and eudaimonic indicators.

A new conceptualization of SWB including hedonic and eudaimonic indicators has recently been developed. The purpose of this study is to investigate the role of gender and relational quality on this new conceptualization of SWB. Hedonic concepts include carefreeness, fun and excitement, high positive affect and low negative affect, pleasure, and satisfaction. Eudaimonic concepts include authenticity, competence, meaningfulness, sexual communal strength, sexual mindfulness, and relatedness (Gravel, 2013).

Gender may have a significant effect on one’s SWB, but results are not yet conclusive. Despite the fact that men and women possess different sexual strategies, they are both equally capable of achieving sexual pleasure and desire (De la Garza-Mercer, 2006).

As sexuality is an interpersonal phenomenon, it is crucial to consider the effects of relational well-being (RWB) on SWB. In fact, research shows that, for dating and married couples, high relational satisfaction is correlated with high sexual satisfaction (Impett, Muise, Peragine, 2014).

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Methodology

Participants:

$N = 322$, Age: $M = 19.91$, $SD = 4.04$

Gender: Men = 22%, Women = 78%

Sexual orientation: Heterosexual = 93.5%, Bisexual = 4.0%, Gay = 1.6%, Lesbian = 0.3%, Other = 0.6%

Religiosity: $M = 2.48$ (a little), $SD = 1.29$, (5-point scale)

Ethnicity: European = 70.5%, Canadian = 5.9%, African = 4.5%, Multi-Ethnic = 4.5%, Asian = 2.8%, Middle Eastern = 2.7%, East Asian = 2.4%, South Asian = 1.5%, Caribbean = 0.9%, Latin American = 0.6%

Duration of relationship (months): $M = 21.13$, $SD = 27.67$

Procedure:

Participants were recruited through the University of Ottawa Integrative System of Participation in Research (ISPR), posters on campus, and class presentations. Participants had to be at least 17 years of age, be engaging in sexual activities with a partner, and have a mastery of the English language. They completed an online survey on *Fluidsurveys* at a time and place of their choice.

Measures:

Demographic measures: age, gender, sexual orientation, religiosity, ethnicity, and relationship length.

Sexual well-being: (Gravel, 2013) measures hedonic sexual well-being (carefreeness, fun and excitement, high positive affect, low negative affect, pleasure, and satisfaction) and eudaimonic sexual well-being (authenticity, competence, meaningfulness, sexual communal strength, sexual mindfulness, and relatedness) (hedonic measures $\alpha = .95$; eudaimonic measures $\alpha = .96$), scale ranging from 1 (not at all) to 7 (totally).

Relational well-being: The Relationship Assessment Scale (Hendrick, Dyke, & Heindrick, 1998), $\alpha = 0.85$, scale ranging from 1 (low) to 5 (high).

Participants also completed a series of measures that were not used in this study.

Objective and hypothesis

Objective:

Examine the effect of gender and relational well-being on eudaimonic and hedonic sexual well-being.

Hypothesis:

A higher level of relational well-being will promote higher levels of hedonic and eudaimonic sexual well-being.

Gender will be examined in an exploratory manner.

Results

The descriptive statistics for the study variables by SWB measures are presented in table 1.

SWB scores for men and women and for participants who had low versus high levels of RWB were compared with a MANOVA. The results are presented in table 1.

Gender and SWB

For eudaimonic measures, gender had a significant effect on contribution to partner’s sexual well-being.

RWB level and SWB

For hedonic measures, RWB had a significant effect on carefreeness, fun and excitement, pleasure, high positive affect, low negative affect, and satisfaction.

For eudaimonic measures, RWB had a significant effect on authenticity, competence, meaningfulness, contribution to partner’s sexual well-being, sexual mindfulness, and relatedness.

Table 1: The effects of gender and relational well-being on sexual well-being

SWB measures	Men		Women		Low RWB		High RWB		Gender		RWB	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>F</i>	η_p^2	<i>F</i>	η_p^2
Hedonic indicators												
Carefreeness	5.01	1.17	5.37	1.23	4.60	1.20	5.53	1.13	1.46	0.01	18.08***	0.06
Fun and excitement	5.86	1.09	6.04	1.15	5.12	1.29	6.27	0.92	0.30	0.00	53.90***	0.16
Pleasure	5.89	1.14	6.09	1.14	5.29	1.27	6.29	0.97	2.41	0.01	41.72***	0.13
High positive affect	5.76	1.15	6.06	1.22	5.17	1.42	6.27	0.99	2.17	0.01	33.80***	0.11
Low negative affect	6.20	1.21	6.36	1.15	5.38	1.50	6.62	0.84	0.01	0.00	42.09***	0.13
satisfaction	5.52	1.30	5.62	1.30	4.80	1.33	5.88	1.17	0.47	0.00	29.51***	0.10
Eudaimonic indicators												
Authenticity	5.43	1.07	5.61	1.28	4.79	1.32	5.83	1.08	0.02	0.00	28.13***	0.09
Competence	5.51	1.22	5.75	1.14	4.91	1.21	5.95	1.02	3.08	0.01	42.50***	0.13
Meaningfulness	5.44	1.17	5.51	1.37	4.65	1.51	5.78	1.13	0.44	0.00	28.42***	0.09
Contribution to partner’s sexual well-being	5.75	1.09	6.12	0.98	5.30	1.16	6.28	0.82	5.55*	0.02	52.34***	0.16
Sexual mindfulness	5.57	1.07	5.84	1.11	4.83	1.13	6.09	0.90	0.54	0.00	56.88***	0.17
Relatedness	5.56	1.21	5.94	1.22	4.90	1.34	6.17	1.00	1.91	0.01	50.54***	0.15

• Note: men, $n = 71$; women, $n = 251$; low RWB, $n = 77$; high RWB, $n = 235$.

• SWB (sexual well-being); RWB (relational well-being).

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

Discussion

Gender and SWB

The students in the University of Ottawa ISPR are in majority women. Thus, the sample for male participants was small. In consequence, the male sample may have been too small to detect other potential differences in SWB.

The results of the study show that gender only has a significant effect on the contribution to partner’s sexual well-being indicator. Women had higher results for this measure. This may be explained by women’s heightened tendency to view sexuality in a context of relationships and commitment, whereas men tend to differentiate between sexuality and commitment (Impett, Muise, Peragine, 2014).

The measures that did not have significant effect sizes may be influenced by our societal view of gender. The technological revolution has led to a lessening of gender role differences (Cole, 2009), because physical distinctions between men and women no longer determine societal roles. Thus, the present-day culture has a more egalitarian view of men and women.

Peterson and Hyde (2010) found that women and men are very similar in terms of sexual behavior and attitudes towards sex. This new mentality discussed above means that it is now more acceptable for women to enjoy having sex, which may promote women’s ability to focus on their personal sexual needs rather than focus solely on their partner’s sexual needs. This would create a balance between women and men’s SWB levels.

RWB and SWB

The results support the hypothesis; higher levels of RWB promote higher levels of SWB in men and women.

RWB level had a significant effect on all of the SWB measures. Research shows that those who have a close connection and commitment with their sexual partner, so have high levels of RWB, tend to have higher levels of SWB (Birnbaum, 2010). Also, RWB is largely influenced by the communication between sexual partners. Better non-sexual communication promotes feelings of closeness, intimacy, and relationship satisfaction. Better sexual communication can maintain a satisfying sexual script for both partners, which will then enhance overall SWB (Miller & Byers, 2004).

Most importantly, the results of this study emphasize eudaimonia’s contribution to overall SWB. RWB had a significant effect on every eudaimonic indicator.

Hedonic SWB only contributes to a portion of one’s overall SWB. Eudaimonic SWB must be present in the conceptualization of SWB, because it allows researchers to account for the processes related to sexual flourishing and to go beyond an understanding of SWB as pleasure and satisfaction. Understanding eudaimonic SWB gives us a broader view of optimal sexuality (Gravel, 2013). In order to achieve this level of optimal sexual response, it is crucial to have a sexual partner who truly understands you, who makes you feel loved and appreciated, and who relates to you. These relationship characteristics are normally present in those with high RWB.

Implications

To conclude, this research allowed us to develop our knowledge on gender and relationship quality’s contribution to sexual well-being. A deeper knowledge of eudaimonic SWB offers a new way of understanding the quality of sexual interactions in relationships. Further research should continue to explore the effects of eudaimonic measures on SWB and to learn how SWB changes throughout the development of relationships.